



83: Growing Pains by cali-chan

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Summary: It had to be on every father's list of worst nightmares, Jim mused as he stood in the doorway of Eleven's room, to come home one day and find his teenage daughter in bed with her boyfriend. PG-13, romance/family, Mike/Eleven, post-S2.

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Note: This story deals with periods, and assorted issues related to them. Please take this note less as a "warning: don't like, don't read" kinda thing, and more as a "it's 2018; if you're still squeamish about a completely-natural-albeit-highly-inconvenient biological process that the vast majority of women of Earth go through every month for a large chunk of their lives, please get over yourself ASAP" kinda thing. Thank you. You may continue reading now.

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It had to be on every father's list of worst nightmares, Jim mused as he stood in the doorway of Eleven's room, to come home one day and find his teenage daughter in bed with her boyfriend.

But then his initial (more alarmist) overprotective-father instinct was allayed when his brain registered that it might not be as bad as it looked, despite the rather intimate position he found them in. They were stretched out facing each other, faces close together to the point that their noses brushed against each other, one of Mike's arms supporting El's neck and the other one wrapped around her waist, legs hopelessly tangled together. But at the same time they were both fully clothed (El was in her pajamas), lying on top of the sheets, and the door had been wide open when he came in.

Granted, the boy wasn't supposed to be here, so there were going to be consequences either way, but perhaps he didn't have to go with his first instinct of grabbing him by the collar of his t-shirt and dumping him on his ass outside the house.

So, instead, he leaned against the doorway with his arms crossed and

glared. "You know, back in the day, when I wanted to sneak into a girl's bed, I at least *tried* to be stealthy about it," he harrumphed in a noticeably displeased tone.

His words were not particularly quiet, but his daughter did not stir. The Wheeler kid, however, did hear him and, as carefully as possible so as not to wake El up, turned so that he was lying on his back rather than on his side, blinking sleepy eyes up at him. Jim dimly wondered when he'd stopped being intimidating to these insolent whelps. Perhaps he'd never been.

Once Mike managed to wake enough to be able to form sentences, he spoke. "She's not feeling well," he stated in a hoarse voice— probably had been sleeping for a while, then— and just like that, all the indignation flew out of Jim's body, to be replaced instantaneously by concern.

He straightened up and made his way closer to the bed. "What's wrong with her?" he asked quietly.

"Cramps, mostly," Mike retorted, also in a low tone, clearly not wanting to bother the girl sleeping soundly next to him. "She had a headache earlier, and I think she was a little nauseous. Hasn't eaten anything since I got here."

Now that he was closer, Jim could see that Eleven was holding a hot water bottle to her belly with both hands— the one with the hippo plushie cover he bought for her last year. "We were supposed to meet up with the others today," Mike further explained, "but she called me this morning and told me she wasn't feeling well, so she wasn't coming. I didn't want her to be alone, so I came over."

"Hmm," Jim mumbled noncommittally. He wasn't sure what to think about this whole thing, honestly. It made his guts clench to see them in bed together, and every fiber of his body was screaming at him that he wasn't ready for this, it was too soon— but he hated seeing Eleven in pain, and he was glad the boy was there for her when he couldn't be. She shouldn't be alone when she was hurting this much.

He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his thinning hair. "I'm gonna brew some chamomile," he let Mike know. "Can you wake her

up? I need her to tell me how bad it is."

The kid nodded, immediately turning on his side again and using his free hand to push El's hair back from her face ever-so-lightly. "Hey, El?" he said, in the softest tone Hopper had ever heard come out of his mouth. "Can you open your eyes for a second? It's just for a little bit."

Little by little she started rousing to his words, until she finally blinked her eyes open. "Hey, sleepyhead," Wheeler smiled at her, still smoothing her hair back tenderly. "You feeling any better?" As if his words reminded her of her plight, her expression morphed into a grimace and she shook her head with a whimper. She pulled her legs tighter to her torso in the fetal position, but also scooted closer to the boy, hiding her face in the crook where his shoulder met his neck.

"I know, I know," Mike said, moving his hands around her to rub at her back, as if trying to alleviate her discomfort somehow. Jim wasn't sure if she'd said anything or if he was just reacting to her pain. "But hey, your dad's here," he heard the kid mumble against her hair. "He'll give you something that'll help, I'm sure." Eleven didn't make a sound save for a small sob, and one of her hands rose to grab at the fabric of his t-shirt. Mike covered with one of his, resting both their hands against his chest.

All of a sudden Jim felt like he was witnessing a scene that was entirely too personal, and he needed to go boil some water for the tea anyway, so he hightailed it out of the room and toward the kitchen without another word.

When he came back with a large mug of chamomile tea, a bucket, and a half-filled kettle so he could refill Eleven's water bottle (it had to have gone cold by that point), Wheeler already had her sitting up, back against the headboard of her bed. She looked miserable, as expected, but she obediently drank the tea as he questioned her about the pain.

Through repeated grimaces and hisses she described it as pretty bad, but not unbearable— though she still would rather not move too much. Jim took her description with a grain of salt, mainly because of how pale she looked and the pained gestures she was making, but

also because that girl could get her arm cut off and she'd still call it a flesh wound, just so she wouldn't be an inconvenience.

Even after all these years, she still held onto the idea that if she wanted or needed too many things, or admitted to discomfort or vulnerability, she'd come off as a nuisance and be punished. No matter how much he tried to drill into her that it was okay to tell him if there was something wrong, to ask for help— that's what he was here for, to provide for her— he still couldn't shake that conditioning off completely. She'd gotten better about it, but he could still see traces of it here and there, and it broke Jim's heart every time.

Mike sat dutifully beside her on the bed the entire time, looking worried enough for the three of them, ready to be handed the empty mug when she was done and quick to hold Eleven's hand once it became available. While Jim picked everything up, the boy helped her lie back down on the bed and get comfortable with the water bottle.

Just as Jim was on his way back to the kitchen he heard Eleven gasp, "No, stay." He paused in the doorway because he thought she was speaking to him, but when he looked back over his shoulder he realized she was speaking to Mike. The kid was on one knee by her bed, and she was holding onto his forearm like she had just pulled him back as he attempted to get up.

"Hey, no, no— I'll be right back, okay?" he assured her, earnest. "I'm just gonna get something to eat. I'll just be right there in the kitchen, and I'll be back right away." He cradled her cheek tenderly. "Try and go back to sleep, all right?" At her reluctant nod, he leaned forward to kiss her forehead, and Jim took that as his cue to keep on walking.

He dumped the used dishes in the sink, not feeling in the mood to wash them, and dropped himself in one of the chairs at the dining table, running a hand over his face. It took about a minute for the Wheeler kid to make his way to the kitchen, where he pulled a couple of Eggos out of the freezer and threw them in the toaster, grabbing a plate out of the cupboards with such ease that it was almost like he'd been living there for years.

Once the waffles were done, Mike put them on the plate and sat

down in the chair directly opposite Jim's, where Eleven usually sat for dinner. "Is it going to make her feel better?" he asked before he even bothered to take a bite of his food. "The tea, I mean."

Jim took a deep breath and let it out slowly, measuring the kid's concerned expression. "Joyce says it helps," he responded with a shrug. He didn't really know much about what to do in cases like these, so he tended to follow Joyce's advice to a tee. She wouldn't lead him wrong when it came to this stuff.

The boy looked at him for a moment like he wasn't entirely convinced, but nodded either way. "I told her to take some Midol earlier," he said after he swallowed the first few bites of his waffle, "but you know how she is about pills."

"Yeah," Jim muttered. He knew how she was about pills. He also knew how she was about *hospitals*, which was pretty much the only reason he wasn't packing her into the Blazer and taking her to the nearest ER from the first sign of pain. She may not need to hide anymore, but there was no reason to tempt fate and risk her getting upset or agitated in the middle of a hospital and using her powers by accident.

He'd learned better during her freshman year, which was her first exposure to large crowds of germ-ridden teenagers. Because of her captivity for the first twelve years of her life, her immune system was susceptible to some of the most common diseases around, and she seemed to catch basically every bug that passed her way. He'd taken her to see a doctor during a particularly nasty bout of the flu, but he had realized what a bad idea that was when the lights started flickering every time she sneezed. He rushed her out of the clinic after the shortest consultation in history, a messily written prescription in hand and his heart in his throat. Since then, he was trying to leave all of that as their last possible resort.

That didn't mean these cramps didn't scare him to death, though. He knew many women didn't have it easy when it came to periods—Diane had complained about them often, too, back when they were married— but it seemed like El had it especially difficult. Thankfully it had only gotten this bad a few times, so he didn't *think* it was necessarily an emergency (and Joyce seemed to agree with him, so

that was reassuring), but he hoped these episodes didn't start happening more often. What if she needed surgery or something? He wasn't particularly fond of hospitals, either— not after Sara— but he'd take her if he had to.

God, he hoped he never had to.

Mike was almost done with his second waffle, clearly in a hurry to get back to Eleven, when Jim snapped out of his reminiscence. When he was finished with the food, he stood up and took his plate to the sink, making sure to run it briefly under the water, along with the stuff Jim had used for the tea (that was Karen's influence right there, Jim was sure).

Once that was done, he stopped by the table again, turning to Jim with a cautious expression. "I'm just gonna wait until she falls back asleep and then I'll go home," he suggested, tentative, almost as if waiting for Jim to object.

He contemplated the boy carefully. He was glad he was being relatively mature about this— most teenage boys would be more than happy to stay as far away as possible from anything having to do with periods, and he was sure the rest of his little gang would fall into that category, too. But the last thing El needed in moments like these was dumb boys shaming her for something that was completely out of her control.

Thankfully, Wheeler had proved himself different in that aspect. Maybe it was just the fact that he had an older sister and that might've helped make him more comfortable with the topic. Or maybe it was just that he wasn't twelve anymore. As much as Jim couldn't help but call him "kid" or "boy" or other similar monikers in his mind, he knew Wheeler wasn't a child anymore— he was almost a man— and while usually that would be exactly the *problem*, it was a relief in this case. This wasn't the first time this happened to El, and much like in every other circumstance, Mike's worry for her overrode any childish fears he might feel at the moment. Jim didn't know which one was the most significant factor, but he was satisfied either way.

He tilted forward in his chair, leaning against his forearms on the

table. "Nah. It's late. You can stay." He saw the boy's brows rise under his fringe in surprise. "I can call your mother and explain. This way no one has to make their way across town in the dark, and anyway... El will feel better if you're with her," he finished in a mutter.

The kid stayed quiet for a moment, shifting his feet as he processed Jim's words, and he was glad for it because he hoped the little whelp understood how goddamned *hard* it was for him to admit that last bit out loud. It wasn't easy for a father to realize that he was no longer the first person his daughter depended on, and with El that moment had come much sooner than he'd hoped due to the way their little family came to be. But the boy was good for her, and no matter how much Jim grumbled about it, he'd always known this is where things were headed with these two. He just had to get used to that being his new reality now.

Eventually, Wheeler nodded. "Okay. Um... like, on the couch, or...?" He cringed as he finished the question, almost like he was afraid he'd said the wrong thing, and Jim had to hold himself back from chuckling.

"Well, you've already spent the entire day sleeping in her bed," he started, leaning his head against his fist while giving Mike a flat stare. "I hardly think a bit more of that is going to make a difference." Then he pointedly lifted one eyebrow at him. "Unless you were planning on doing something other than sleep..."

Predictably, the boy bristled. "No, I wouldn't—" He frowned. "I mean, she's in *pain*— that's—" His eyes widened as he realized what he'd just implied. "Not that in any other circumstance— I mean, we wouldn't—" By that point he seemed to realize he was just digging himself deeper. "—I just wouldn't," he finished, rather lamely.

This time Hopper couldn't hold back a snort. "Relax, kid, I know you wouldn't," he said, deciding to give him a break even though it was all too easy to tease him. Jim wasn't dumb. He knew Wheeler getting daring was the least of his problems— no, if there was anything to be worried about, it was his daughter batting those big brown Bambi eyes of hers and convincing her hopelessly infatuated boyfriend to take steps he otherwise would think twice about initiating. Poor boy wouldn't know what hit him, honestly, so Jim figured he could

probably cut him a little slack by this point.

Just a *little*.

Hell, it's not like they *weren't* doing the things every other teenager in the world did. They were sixteen, for Christ's sake, and again, Jim was not dumb. But they were smart kids. He knew they wouldn't be stupid about it. That was the most he could ask of them without completely deluding himself. And in this particular situation... well, this situation was different, anyway.

"Right," Mike retorted, shoulders drooping as he relaxed for a moment, though he still looked a little flustered. "So, I'm just gonna..." He signaled behind him toward Eleven's bedroom.

"Do me a favor, though?" Jim interrupted before the boy could take a step in that direction. "Next time you're gonna be here on your own, just— call me and let me know, would ya?" He rubbed his tired eyes with his fingers. "It'll save me the small heart attack when I walk in the door."

The boy seemed surprised once again. "Next time?" he asked, in an incredulous tone, as he jumped to the logical conclusion. "Does... that mean you're rescinding the chaperone rule? I can come here on my own?"

He looked so damn eager that Jim had to fight not to roll his eyes. Both teenagers had *hated* that rule since day one, and they had broken it more than once in the past, he was sure— as Wheeler's presence today would attest to. But they could be alone literally anywhere else in Hawkins, so it's not like the stupid rule meant much. (Yes, Jim was aware it was a stupid rule, but he'd instituted it back when their home was the *only* place where they could be together, and he clung to it because, well, he liked to pretend he was at least doing *something* to hold the inevitable onslaught of hormones at bay, you know?)

Jim realized some time ago, however, that for Mike the disdain for the rule was less about being alone with his daughter and more about being *trusted* to be alone with his daughter, which made this conversation all the more significant. The kid wanted to be

recognized as an equally significant part of Eleven's life— wanted his respect, his approval. What he didn't know was that he'd already won it ten times over, and it was past time for Jim to admit that out loud.

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, looking straight at the kid. "Yeah," he conceded. "Yeah, I'm taking back the rule. But listen here, Wheeler," he hurried to add when he saw the boy start to grin; the gesture froze on his face when he realized there was more to it.

Jim pointed in the direction of El's room. "That girl right there is the most important thing I have in my life," he stated seriously. The boy's expression mirrored that solemnity. "I'm trusting you with her," he added. "Don't make me regret it."

Mike was quiet for a heartbeat, but then he pursed his lips and nodded. "I won't," he promised, just as serious. Jim thought that would be that, he'd just go back to El's room and be done with it, but instead, the boy remained firm where he stood. "She's the most important thing in my life, too," he declared, looking at Jim straight in the eye, and there was no room for doubt in that statement. Even if Hopper hadn't known this already, he'd be certain now.

He held the young man's gaze for a moment longer before nodding. "Good," he acknowledged. El deserved nothing less. "Go on, then," he signaled toward El's room with a sharp nod of his head, and Wheeler didn't even blink before complying with *that* suggestion.

Jim stood up with a sigh and went to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of beer and popping it open quickly. He was itching for a cigarette, but he was trying to cut back and the summer was coming into its own that week, so a beer was probably the better choice anyway. He stood by the window for a moment, trying to center himself, and then decided to go and see if there was a baseball match or something on TV. No use worrying at the moment. El was... coping— in pain but toughing it out— and as long as that didn't change, there was no need for drastic action. No matter how much he wished he could magically take the pain from her and bear it himself.

Following that thought, he couldn't help but stop by the door to her room on his way to the TV. When he looked inside, he saw that El

was still in bed, holding the hot water bottle to her tummy and teetering on the edge of sleep as Mike pulled the bedsheets from under her. He'd opened both windows to let some cool air and moonlight in, the room still dark save for the dim light coming in from the living room. He sat down on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes, and then laid down beside El, carefully so as not to jostle her or hurt her.

She drew closer to him in what looked to Jim like an almost subconscious movement, throwing an arm around his waist as his hand moved in circles up and down her back in a comforting manner. "Hey, so... your dad said I can stay," he disclosed in a low, soft tone.

Eleven had already closed her eyes, resting her head against his shoulder. "Thank you," she replied in a tremulous whisper, grateful that he was back, but also very clearly still hurting.

"You don't have to thank me. I want to be here with you," the boy responded, looking down at her with his heart in his gaze and a smile on his lips. "Go to sleep, okay? You'll feel better in the morning," he added, tucking a few curly strands of her hair behind her ear.

"...Promise?" El mumbled, sounding more asleep than awake at this point.

"Promise," he confirmed, and Jim sure hoped he was right. He was about to continue on his way to the TV when Mike spoke again, and it stopped him dead in his tracks. "Hey, El?" He saw the boy take a deep breath. "I just want you to know that... that I..."

His voice trailed off and the silence stretched, and Hopper wasn't sure if he'd stopped speaking because he was rethinking his words, or because he'd ultimately decided not to say them. In the end, it all dissolved into a sigh. "...You're already asleep," Wheeler muttered over her even breaths, resigned when he realized that El wouldn't hear anything he said anyway.

The boy scooted just a little bit closer, if that was even possible, and dropped a soft kiss on her forehead. "I'll be here when you wake up," he whispered, and closed his eyes, resting his head against hers.

Jim was more than aware that "I'll be here when you wake up" wasn't what Mike had initially intended to say. Yeah, he had a pretty good idea what it was going to be, he thought as he pulled his weight away from the doorframe and took another sip of his beer. A big one. More like a gulp.

He moved to the living room and turned the TV on at a low volume so as not to disturb them. Dropping down on the couch, he decided to watch the rest of the inning before calling Karen. He pulled the coffee table closer so he could put his feet up and leaned back, deciding it was better to focus on the Hoosiers possibly pulling an upset at the bottom of the 9th than on the fact that his daughter was in bed with a boy just a few feet away.

He had a feeling he was going to need another beer.

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Notes: I know the Hoppers would probably have moved elsewhere by this point— whether because of Hopper/Joyce or just for convenience once El is finally out into the world— but I LOVE THAT STUPID CABIN, OKAY? I love it and I'll cling to it until canon forces me otherwise. I tried to keep this vague just in case, but in my head it's the cabin they're at. So... yeah.

The bit about getting your arm cut off and still calling it a flesh wound is a reference to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which hit theaters in 1975, and for some reason I feel like it'd be right up Hopper's alley. The Hoosiers are the sports teams (in this case, the baseball team) of Indiana University Bloomington, which is the largest university in Indiana. They are part of the Big Ten Conference and came in 3rd during the 1987 season.

This started out as a story about Hopper catching Mike and Eleven making out, and somehow it morphed into this. I like this better, to be honest, but I may still write that other story at some point if I can find the right angle (I have an image of that scene in my head, I just don't yet know where to go with it, hahaha). Keep your fingers

crossed that it happens, because it could be really fun. xD